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EDITORIAL

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China–Africa language and cultural exchange: Towards cross-cultural pluriversal synergies

ABSTRACT

In the contemporary context of profound mutual learning among global civilizations, China–Africa language and cultural exchanges have transcended the scope of traditional people-to-people exchanges, emerging as a key strategic pivot for South–South cooperation. This Special Issue focuses on such exchanges, exploring how Chinese and African participants achieve cross-cultural knowledge production and communication through pluriversal synergies while preserving the uniqueness of their civilizations. The research findings of the six articles indicate that China–Africa exchanges based on equality and mutual benefit are widespread

KEYWORDS

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diverse collaboration

in practice. The exchanges continue the long history of interaction between the two regions and involve multiple subjects, fields regions; they are also multidimensional. The development of digital media has further weakened the constraints of time and space, providing more possibilities for China–Africa language and cultural exchanges.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is integral to human social activity and civilization, with the capacity not only to liberate humanity but also to unite ‘it in community and communion, solidarity and understanding’ (UNESCO 1980: 3). These findings from an influential UNESCO report, *Many Voices, One World: Towards a New, More Just, and More Efficient World Information and Communication Order*, importantly underscore the role of communication that takes place, ‘not only because of technological discoveries, but also because there is a consciousness of opportunities and needs – social, political, economic, cultural or spiritual’ (1980: 13). This is particularly important in 2025 as the world celebrates 80 years of the establishment of the United Nations and twenty years after the launch of the 2005 UN Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (Cultural Convention). Both are examples of world communication that bring us closer together. The UNESCO (1980) findings provide a firm foundation of global aspirations for cross-cultural communication. They offer a suitable backdrop for making sense of China–Africa language and cultural mutual exchanges that have transcended traditional humanities exchanges to become a key strategic pivot for South–South understanding and cooperation. The contemporary China–Africa exchanges arguably build on and expand other historical foundations, such as the stipulations of the *Asia–Africa–Arab Bandung Conference* in 1955, which marked a key moment for the cultural dimensions of the China–Africa relations and forms of future engagement (Xinhua Net 2025). China has maintained a strategic and evolving approach to Africa, first formalized in its 2006 white paper and later updated in November 2021 as *China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals* (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China 2021). This policy outlines key principles such as sincerity, equality, mutual benefit and shared development, and underscores China’s commitment to deepening cooperation. The 2021 revision emphasizes building a stronger China–Africa community with enhanced coordination and support, aligning with the African Union’s (2015) *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*, a long-term vision for sustainable growth across the continent. The China–Africa cross-sector synergies have grown, with new paradigms for mutual learning through cross-cultural knowledge production and communication. With many African countries incorporating Chinese language instruction into their national education systems, international Chinese language education as a medium for China–Africa language and cultural exchange and mutual learning among civilizations is undergoing a value reconstruction and paradigm shift from instrumental communication to meaningful co-construction. It is becoming an important component of building a China–Africa cultural community. By building a cross-cultural dialogue mechanism based on diverse collaboration, China–Africa language and cultural exchanges inject differentiated theoretical resources and practical wisdom into the global knowledge production system.

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Meanwhile, the theme of ‘China–Africa Language and Cultural Exchange’ (the Special Issue) upholds the academic positioning of the *Journal of African Media Studies (JAMS)* as an interdisciplinary journal that provides a forum for debate on the historical and contemporary aspects of media and communication in Africa and beyond. Both the Special Issue theme and *JAMS*’s mission arguably resonate with UNESCO’s emphasis on how communication is important for ‘cultural promotion’, ‘preserving the heritage of the past’, ‘developing culture’, ‘widening the individual’s horizons’ and ‘awakening imagination’; and ‘stimulating’ aesthetic needs and ‘creativity’ in humanity (1980: 14). China–Africa Language and Cultural Exchange provides a valuable platform for theorizing cross-cultural knowledge production, transmission of meaning and emotional connection across countries and regions. While contributing to the ongoing repositioning of media and cultural studies, this Special Issue transcends the cognitive structure of centre–periphery and constructs a research paradigm of pluriversal modality and collaborative synergy, strengthens the cross-subjectivity construction of the China–Africa academic community and systematically explores the development trend, core challenges and strategic opportunities of China–Africa language and cultural exchanges.

The six articles selected for the Special Issue systematically examine key topics such as the domestication of Chinese language cultural and educational practices in Africa, as well as the development of digital media platforms, the intertextual transformation of cultural symbols and the transfer of artistic cognition. These articles continue *JAMS*’s academic tradition of repositioning African cultural studies and echo the international academic community’s call for a paradigm shift in international communication and cross-cultural research.

Using the China–Africa cultural exchange as a model, and through interdisciplinary, multi-case empirical research, the Special Issue preserves the uniqueness of each civilizational form while achieving intellectual innovation through pluriversal synergy. It also constructs a dual path of theoretical and practical innovation for the innovative development of knowledge production systems in the Global South, enabling academic research to respond to and transcend real-world issues. Ultimately, the Special Issue points to a more inclusive academic vision to promote the formation of a diverse and modern pattern of harmony in diversity in the global knowledge production system through in-depth research on China–Africa language and cultural exchanges.

PLURIVERSAL SYNERGY AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The concept of pluriversal synergy proposed in the Special Issue foregrounds the concepts of intersubjectivity and trans-subjectivity in cross-cultural communication and emphasizes the independence and symbiotic development of Chinese and African cultures. This concept, which combines the argument of Escobar’s pluriverse, ‘a world in which many worlds fit’ (2020: 9), and Haken’s view of synergetics, ‘systems composed of many parts can acquire macroscopic structures or functions by self-organization’ (1985: 205), has been less frequently mentioned in previous scholarship on cross-cultural and China–African exchange. However, pluriversal synergy aligns with the broader context of the rise of the Global South discourse and offers a viable paradigm for inter-South cultural exchange. Pluriversal thinking resonates with new and alternative approaches in African media and communication, such as Afrokology (Mano and Milton 2021), which emphasizes the coexistence of

multiple world-views, cultures and knowledge systems as opposed to the idea of cultural dominance or homogenization. Inclusive and plural approaches are legitimate sources of insight to drive mutual cultural collaboration within and between nations and regions.

First, pluriversal synergy agrees with Escobar's (2020: 9) view of cultural diversity as a necessity. This concept inherits Boas's (1911) cultural relativism, recognizing the role of social background, language and environmental factors in shaping culture, and respecting each group's unique customs and beliefs. Second, pluriversal synergy emphasizes equality, which is the central connecting thread in the Special Issue, and places China and Africa equally. China and Africa share a mutual and common stance in the pursuit of national independence and national prosperity. China supports African countries in 'exploring modernization paths befitting their national conditions, and help ensure equal rights and equal opportunities for all countries' (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2024). Third, language and cultural exchange within pluriversal synergy is multidirectional and an inevitable outcome of close bilateral exchanges. African art, music, food and dress have circulated for millennia. The Special Issue, therefore, emphasizes UNESCO's ideals of seeing African culture as living, valid and independent on the one hand, and interacting with and influencing global culture on the other.

This series of studies combines the concepts of pluriverse and synergetics, using the case of China–Africa language and cultural exchange to explore how, within the context of international communication, countries in the Global South can effectively and comprehensively achieve inherent harmony and sustainable development in global cultural interaction. It explores not just individuals but community and multi-agent participation, multi-dimensional interaction and multimodal media, thereby promoting equal exchange and cooperation among diverse cultures. This approach shares common ground with China's concept of a community with a shared future for humanity, which, since its introduction by President Xi Jinping in 2013, has put a premium on global cooperation (Wang 2025). In practice, the concept of pluriversal synergy has gradually permeated all aspects of China–Africa language and cultural exchange. For example, at the government level, the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) has established a pluriversal synergy dialogue mechanism for China–Africa friendly cooperation. In the field of education, in 2025 the Communication University of China (CUC) hosted events to mark the UN Cultural Convention of 2005, with delegates including African creatives, students and scholars (Institute for a Community with Shared Future 2025). They also launched a book on the important role of the United Nations in relation to the community with a shared future for humanity. The increasing China–Africa educational exchanges are also important, resulting in approximately 120,000 government scholarships to African countries (Wang 2020). So far, nineteen African countries have incorporated Chinese into their national education systems (Tianjin Normal University 2024), significantly broadening the channels for language and cultural exchange between China and Africa. In the academic field, Zhejiang Normal University hosted the China–Africa Think Tank Forum, bringing together Chinese and African academic, educational and media communities for discussions and promoting pluriversal synergy to academic dialogue and policy implementation (Liu and Lin 2020). In the economic and trade sphere, Chinese + Vocational Skills training programmes, such as the Chinese Workshop and the Luban Workshop, empower China–Africa economic and trade cooperation, building a pluriversal synergy

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cross-cultural exchange platform for Chinese and African business collaboration. These language and cultural practices have arguably rebuilt mechanisms of cultural trust between China and Africa and promoted the sustainable development of the regional economy, forming a practical paradigm for differentiated collaboration (Anon. 2024).

At a time when globalization and digitalization are deeply intertwined, cross-cultural communication faces unprecedented complexity and some important historic opportunities. How to effectively achieve in-depth dialogue and understanding between cultures has become a core issue that urgently needs to be addressed. The core value of pluriversal synergy lies in its advocacy of multi-subject participation (government, business, academia and non-governmental organizations), multidimensional interaction (policy, economy, education and technology) and multimodal media (digital platforms, cultural heritage and artistic creation), which constitutes a collaborative symbiotic mechanism aimed at bridging cultural differences and promoting knowledge-sharing and innovation. Therefore, with pluriversal synergy as its core concept, the Special Issue seeks shared values based on respect for cultural diversity, strengthens mutual respect and understanding between cultures, and promotes cross-cultural practice through systematic thinking, which is a great innovation and academic value.

OVERVIEW OF THE PRACTICE AND RESEARCH BACKGROUND OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE BETWEEN CHINA AND AFRICA

China–Africa language and cultural exchanges, as indicated above, have a long history, a broad scope and diverse types, gradually forming a multi-subject, multi-field, cross-regional, three-dimensional, pluriversal and synergistic cross-cultural exchange network. In terms of time, the fleet of the Chinese navigator Zheng He reached the east coast of Africa 600 years ago, opening the ancient Maritime Silk Road and starting the process of cultural exchanges between China and Africa (Wang 2019). Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, driven by cooperation mechanisms such as the FOCAC and the Belt and Road Initiative, China and African countries have developed in-depth, multifaceted interactions. Furthermore, China–Africa language and cultural exchanges and cooperation have virtually spread across the continent. For example, in international Chinese language education, since the establishment of the Confucius Institute at the University of Nairobi in Kenya in 2005, 47 African countries have established Confucius Institutes or Confucius Classrooms (Tianjin Normal University 2024). The digital age has further expanded the scope of China–Africa language and cultural exchanges. In addition to Chinese language education partnerships such as the Confucius Institute, the Chinese Bridge Club, the Chinese Workshop and the Luban Workshop, Chinese and African people can now engage in language learning, cultural exchange and trade via the internet, regardless of location.

Current academic research on China–African language and cultural exchange focuses primarily on the following aspects. First, theoretically, it emphasizes the political economy of language education. Existing academic research generally focuses on the tension between Chinese language education and the Indigenous language ecosystems of Africa. From the perspectives of international relations, geopolitics and global communication, it also analyses the inherent connections between cultural exchange, political diplomacy

and economic and trade cooperation. However, most discussions fail to fully utilize a pluriversal synergy discourse to reveal the potential for mutually constructive innovation between China and Africa. Second, on a practical level, existing academic research focuses on the cross-media communication of cultural symbols, such as the symbolic translation of traditional media like film, television and literature. There is insufficient exploration of collaborative narrative mechanisms in new media such as social media, short videos and games. Furthermore, research focuses primarily on symbols and communicators, lacking an exploration of the mechanisms of audiences' reception and re-creation from a participatory cultural perspective. Third, at the methodological level, existing studies mostly adopt a single-disciplinary research paradigm, such as research within the corresponding disciplinary system from the perspective of linguistics, communication and education, and lack interdisciplinary collaborative integration analysis methods.

The Special Issue's academic exploration fills the gaps from different perspectives, demonstrating three groundbreaking values. First, at the theoretical level, introducing a pluriversal synergy perspective deeply deconstructs the power relations in language and cultural communication, revealing the inherent mechanisms of mutual learning between Chinese and African civilizations. Second, at the practical level, focusing on China–Africa language and cultural exchange, six articles systematically examine key issues such as the localization of Chinese language educational practices in Africa, the empowerment of digital media platforms, the intertextual transformation of cultural symbols and the shift in cognitive paradigms through interdisciplinary and multi-case empirical research. These articles provide a reference for implementing pathways for mutual learning among civilizations. Third, at the strategic level, by strengthening the intersubjectivity of the China–Africa academic community, the Special Issue explores the establishment of a knowledge production paradigm with characteristics of the Global South, promoting the transformation of the knowledge production system in the Global South towards a pluralistic modernity, thereby promoting the structural transition of South–South cooperation from conceptual consensus to a community of practice.

KEY THEMES

Within a pluriversal synergy framework, the six articles in the Special Issue delve into various core topics. These include the practice of Chinese language education in Kenya, the innovative application of singing teaching methods in Nigeria and South African audiences' understanding and appreciation of Chinese calligraphy. There is also a focus on the intercultural dialogue between Chinese and Egyptian burial culture, the international communication of the Chinese language through the social media platform RedNote and Cameroonian students' perceptions of the international image of Chinese. These articles offer empirical support and theoretical references for studying China–African language and cultural exchange from diverse perspectives, embodying a multifaceted academic philosophy.

Diversified research

Research subjects

The studies cover East Africa (Kenya), West Africa (Nigeria, Cameroon), North Africa (Egypt) and Southern Africa (South Africa), showcasing geographic

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and cultural diversity, which transcends simplified pan-African narratives and achieves a precise focus on specific countries and regions.

Research dimensions

The six articles present a multi-layered and multi-dimensional approach. At the macro level, they focus on the history of China–Africa language and cultural exchange, local policies and interactions with China–Africa cooperation mechanisms such as the Belt and Road Initiative. At the meso level, they analyse the collaborative mechanisms of institutions and platforms such as Confucius Institutes, museums and RedNote. They delve into audience cognitive differences, emotional resonance, symbolic interpretation and identity construction processes at the micro level.

Research methods

A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating experiments, questionnaires, interviews and digital trace analysis to ensure the credibility and replicability of the findings. Meanwhile, the interaction between Chinese and African researchers aligned with pluriversal synergy.

Research teams

The research for the Special Issue is a collaborative effort between Chinese and African scholars. The African members of the research team come from the University of Nairobi in Kenya, Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Nigeria, the University of Yaoundé II in Cameroon, Cairo University in Egypt and the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, further enhancing the research's local relevance and applicability.

Synergy interpretation of key dimensions

The six articles systematically explain the synergy mechanism of China–Africa language and cultural exchanges around the four key dimensions of 'history-development', 'cognitive-affective', 'digital-medium' and 'dialogue-empiricism'.

From the perspective of history-development, the article 'From language teaching to people-to-people exchanges: Two decades of Chinese language education in Kenya and its role in Kenya–China educational exchange' explores the dynamic coupling between Chinese language education practice and local needs through the development of Chinese language education in Kenya. It proposes establishing a Chinese language education system that prioritizes standardization and differentiation, promotes multi-channel local teacher training mechanisms, develops digital resource platforms and provides an implementation path for the dynamic coupling of global standards and local practices. The year 2025 marked the twentieth anniversary of Chinese language education in Kenya and East Africa, and this discussion of history and development holds significant practical value.

In the cognitive-affective dimension, the article 'Multimodal synergy and third-order paradigm construction: An innovative cross-cultural study of singing pedagogy in Chinese language education in Nigeria' proposes a three-order teaching paradigm of phoneme perception–phrase memory–pragmatic transfer, confirming that multimodal teaching can effectively improve language learning efficiency and enhance cultural interaction, while the article 'Chinese

calligraphy from a cross-cultural perspective: Comparison of aesthetic and cultural perceptions between China and South Africa' uses Peirce's semiotics as its theoretical basis to study the aesthetic and cultural cognition of Chinese calligraphy among South African audiences, revealing the key role of common interpretants in cross-cultural communication and deconstructing the one-way communication process of cultural symbols.

In the digital-medium dimension, the article 'Encoding/decoding in Sino-Egyptian cross-cultural dialogue: Egyptian reception of a livestream on imperial tomb symbolism' uses empirical research on Chinese and Egyptian museums to demonstrate how the chat, question-and-answer and visual-enhancement functions of digital media contribute to the formation of a cross-cultural interpretation community and promote the cross-cultural decoding and meaning negotiation of digital resources. The article 'Innovative practices of the Xiaohongshu (RedNote) platform: Engaging in international Chinese communication in the Nigerian context' selects RedNote, a representative digital platform, as the empirical field, and combines quantitative data with semi-structured in-depth interviews to systematically explore the effectiveness mechanism of Chinese language acquisition and cultural adaptation in the context of digital platforms.

In the dialogue-empiricism dimension, the article 'Perceptions of the Chinese language's international image: The perspectives of Cameroonian students' systematically examines Cameroonian students' cognitive mechanisms of the international image of the Chinese language based on questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The study found that the perception of the Chinese language in Cameroon is a dynamic, bottom-up perspective shaped by individuals' experiences. Cameroonian students generally hold a positive perception of the Chinese language, which reflects the friendly macro-level relations between China and Cameroon.

CONCLUSION

As China–Africa language and cultural exchanges become increasingly close, the concept of pluriversal synergy holds both theoretical innovation and practical value. The editors believe China–Africa language and cultural exchanges should promote the philosophy and paradigm of equal participation by multiple actors, systematic integration of multiple resources and collaborative cooperation across multiple pathways. The six articles in the Special Issue showcase the concept of pluriversal synergy, focusing on China–Africa language and cultural exchange, providing practical methodological tools for mutual learning between Chinese and African civilizations and promoting the transition of South–South cooperation from conceptual consensus to a community of practice.

The six articles utilize mixed research methods to form a three-dimensional research landscape that stretches from historical context to the digital frontier and from individual cognition to institutional collaboration. These studies break through the confines of existing research at the three levels of theoretical construction, research methods and practical reference. Theoretically, they transcend the single perspective of language education as instrumental communication and emphasize the two-way construction between China and African countries in knowledge production, symbolic translation and technological application. Methodologically, the six articles cover qualitative and

quantitative analysis, demonstrating the diverse and synergistic relationship between digital media, language teaching and cultural interaction from an interdisciplinary perspective. Practically, they delve into the local sociocultural context of Africa, focusing on the interpretation of meaning and behavioural feedback of real subjects such as students, teachers and cultural consumers, providing empirical evidence for China–Africa people-to-people and cultural exchanges.

The Special Issue’s interpretation of language and cultural exchange between China and Africa still has certain limitations, however. First, current research is limited in its depth at the societal level, and further exploration is needed into the micro-level impacts of urban–rural, class-based and educational differences across African countries on cultural exchange. Second, existing articles insufficiently discuss how civil society actors, such as non-governmental organizations and private enterprises, have played a pluriversal synergy effect during language and cultural exchange between China and Africa. Third, digital media research focuses on platform technology and user behaviour, with limited discussion of the promising field of the application of artificial technology in China–Africa language and cultural exchanges.

In conclusion, these six articles, centring on pluriversal synergy, construct a comprehensive, multidimensional and inclusive research framework for China–African language and cultural exchanges, laying the foundation for subsequent research. Looking ahead, the *JAMS* Special Issue on ‘China–Africa Language and Cultural Exchange’ will, while adhering to this core principle of pluriversal synergy, focus on more nuanced issues, exploring multiple perspectives such as digitization, intelligence, branding, localization and interactivity, to further promote the building of an academic community for language and cultural exchange in the Global South.

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